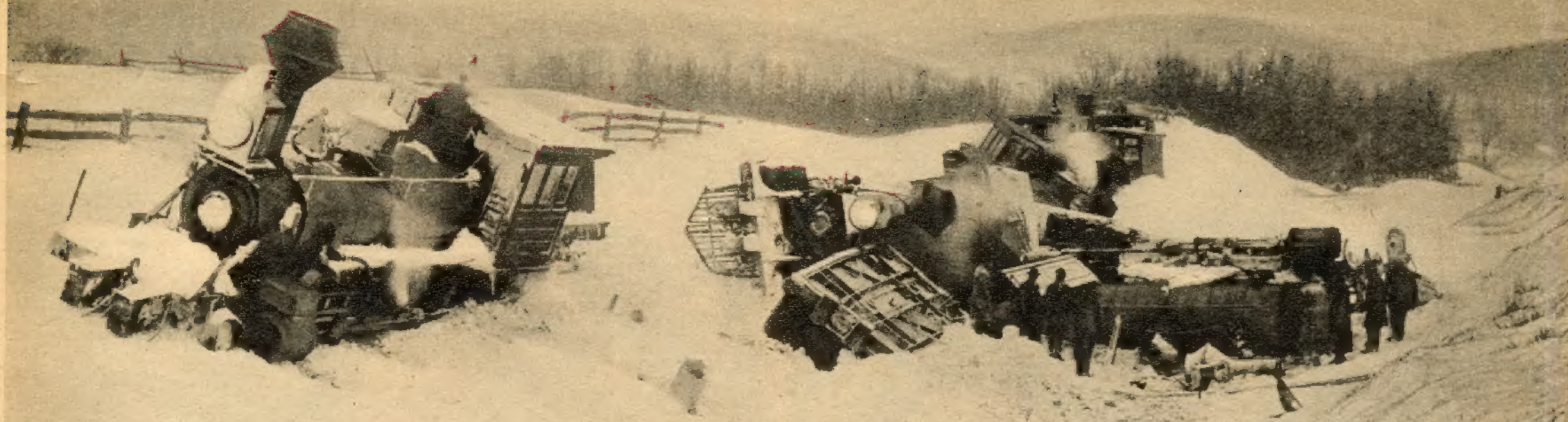




The Blizzard of '88

Wreckage of five Morris & Essex engines after derailment near Musky Bridge while trying to clear tracks of drifts piled high by THE blizzard.

(New Jersey probably had a more important role in the establishment and development of railroads than any other state in the country. This article, the tenth of a series, recalls the trials and tribulations of the hardy Jersey commuter during the memorable "Big Blow" of '63 years ago. Not only did it snow for three days, but the temperature dropped to near zero and winds screamed at full gale strength, sometimes reaching 60 miles an hour.)

THOSE whose convictions permitted the reading of Sunday newspapers on March 11, 1888, took comfort from the weatherman's guess that the miserable, murky Sabbath weather would give way to "clearing and colder" on Monday.

It didn't seem to add up at Sunday evening service time, when the drizzling rain turned to snow. Still, the weatherman, with all those maps and gadgets and experience certainly knew more than Uncle Henry—no matter if his trick knee "felt like snow."

Monday morning the weatherman was in hiding—perhaps buried under one of the drifts creeping up over the first floor windows of homes throughout the state.

Uncle Henry was right. It was snowing. It was, in fact, snowing the Blizzard of '88.

Jersey train riders refused to believe the snow could amount to much, this late in March. They shook down the stoves in the parlors on Monday morning, turned up their oil lamps and got dressed to go into the city as usual.

After all, if they didn't, there wouldn't be any business in New York.

NO reason to worry, Mother, the good old Erie (or Jersey Central or Pennsylvania or Lackawanna) will be running. Nothing stops the Lehigh Valley. The Susquehanna always gets through...

Still, there was something disquieting about the fact that no train whistles could be heard as they plodded through the deepening snow to the depot.

Probably that blamed howling wind drowned out the whistles...

Half frozen, the early arrivals greeted the latecomers for the first train. The latecomers greeted the early arrivals for the next train. And so on—until the throngs overflowed the station walls and hundreds stood under unvalled sheds, "as unprotected

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

Think Things Were Tough in 'Big Snow' of '47? Here's What Jersey Commuters of 63 Years Ago Went Through

(Photo Credits: Thomas T. Taber, Railroad Magazine, New York Public Library and New Jersey Historical Society)



"A Beleaguered City" was title of this March 15, 1888 newspaper illustration. Snowbound trains and ferries are on the Jersey side.

as if they had stood in the drifts beyond."

... But the trains came not.

Businessmen fretted and fumed at the railroads. Cashiers "with fractions of safe combinations locked in their heads" were apprehensive. New York safes would stay closed if they didn't arrive.

Commuters on the Lackawanna expressed themselves bitterly: "I'll bet if we could get into Newark the Pennsylvania would get us there." Com-

muters on the Erie were sure the Lackawanna was running. Commuters on the Pennsylvania were certain the Jersey Central was having no such foolish trouble.

ALL night long, however, the railroads had been accepting the awful truth that this was a blizzard, but every one of them was completely unprepared to cope with the force of the storm. Some even neglected to take the normal precaution of running

trains up and down the line to keep the tracks clear.

At first the Jersey Central had slightly better going than its contemporaries; the snows hadn't drifted over the plains south of the Watchung Mountains where the Central ran. On Monday morning two Central trains fought their way to Jersey City. One arrived before daybreak; the other reached the ferry slip at 9:30 A. M.

The 9:30 A. M. train ride was a frightful experience.

"The train was crowded to its utmost holding," said a New York newspaper. "Snow and sleet came through the smallest crevices. It was not more comfortable than a refrigerator." The commuters trooped aboard a ferry-boat about noon. After the ordeal, a few years.

HEAVY seas slapped against the ferry slips and the northeast gale made it difficult to get the ferry into the river. Nevertheless the ferry got underway for New York.

Every one of the next 30 minutes seemed like an hour aboard that overloaded ferry, "black with people."

Out in midstream the captain had the sickening knowledge that one false move would overturn his boat. The passengers felt cold fear as the minutes dragged by. Many prayed silently.

Brilliantly, however, the captain nosed the craft through the ice floes and gradually eased it into the New York slip. As the front of the big ferry thudded into place lusty cheers for the captain swept over the docks.

The captain didn't make another trip for three days.

By midmorning of Monday, March 12, there was no longer any question that this was a blizzard—the worst in the memory of then living man—and the snow was still falling.

Trains were stalled on railroad tracks throughout New Jersey. Out in the Meadows the Chicago Limited had come to a stop. Several locomotives which had tried to blast their way through the deep drifts were derailed near Bergen Cut. A dozen trains were lined up on Lackawanna tracks in the Oranges. Two Montclair trains were stalled at Roseville.

The west-bound track of the Pennsylvania was open through Bergen Cut and the railroad debated the feasi-



Three engines were used to pull this train into Orange on Wednesday, March 14, when partial service started.

bility of sending trains in both directions over the tracks.

Several ladies got off the train in Newark when they heard about running trains both ways on a single track—with telegraph wires down. "We'll stay in Newark," they said, in chorus.

Commuters jammed Pennsylvania's Newark station. Some showed their anger. "I must get to New York," a big red-faced man kept shouting. "Monday's the big day! I'll give \$500 to get to New York!"

Track Superintendent Smith burst into the station.

"Another train for New York in 10 minutes," he yelled. "We can take 100 passengers!"

The red-faced business man led the rush for the five cars. He got through to New York, too, even though the train "writhed and snorted like a giant through the drifts."

A MAN from Rahway who missed the train laughed and went across the street to a saloon. Dozens of others followed, on the theory that if they had to stay in Newark they might as well take reasonable precautions against freezing to death.

At noon Monday three Lackawanna trains from New York forced their way past Brick Church, bringing the news that the sole Hoboken-bound train to go through all night was stuck in the Meadows.

Minutes later those three trains themselves were stuck between Brick

Church and Orange, the 1,500 passengers on them "as hopelessly imprisoned as those on the Meadows." The last steam of the locomotives was used to whistle for aid. There was silence. Passengers waited, then moved away by ones and twos along paths cut through the snow to Orange streets.

Most passengers on snowbound trains resigned themselves to waiting in the relatively warm cars wherever they might be. Residents along the way gave some of them temporary shelter; buckets of warm soup were brought to the trains. Extra blankets were provided. Roseville Athletic Club opened its doors to passengers on stalled Montclair trains. Generally, the treatment was excellent, although some charges were made that an outrageous 25 cents was being extorted for a sandwich in Orange.

OUT in the Meadows the 31 passengers aboard the crippled Chicago Limited decided to make a night of it. Already they knew a \$5 refund was waiting them on their tickets, bought with the guarantee that if the train was an hour late getting to Chicago they would get back the premium they paid to ride the crack express.

"We have \$100 worth of liquor, cigars and food aboard," the porter announced on the Limited, thus removing all temptation to venture into the blizzard.

Local trains in the Meadows were less well prepared. One group of pas-

sengers on a train stuck just beyond Harrison took up a purse and volunteers struggled into town and back with welcome groceries.

Jersey City terminals were a madhouse, crowded with people—ranging from those who had insisted on coming east from Newark and now insisted on getting back, to scores on their way to Florida.

ONE Jersey City station was host to two blizzard-checked theater companies, the cast of "Woman Hater" due to open in Williamsport on Monday night and the cast of "Samuel Posen," booked for Philadelphia on Tuesday.

Considerably vexed, too, in another station in Jersey City was the group of glamorous lovelies of Little Clay's revue, "Dizzy Blondes," who had set out Monday morning for Scranton in all good faith.

All ladies, including Miss Clay's girls, were nobly treated by the railroads. The Erie moved its sleeping cars into its Jersey City terminal and made up berths for the ladies. Distaff passengers were always fed first. Male passengers on local trains stalled in drifts throughout the state gallantly stayed out of cars set aside for the women.

TUESDAY at noon the snow stopped. The railroads could add up exactly what they had to do.

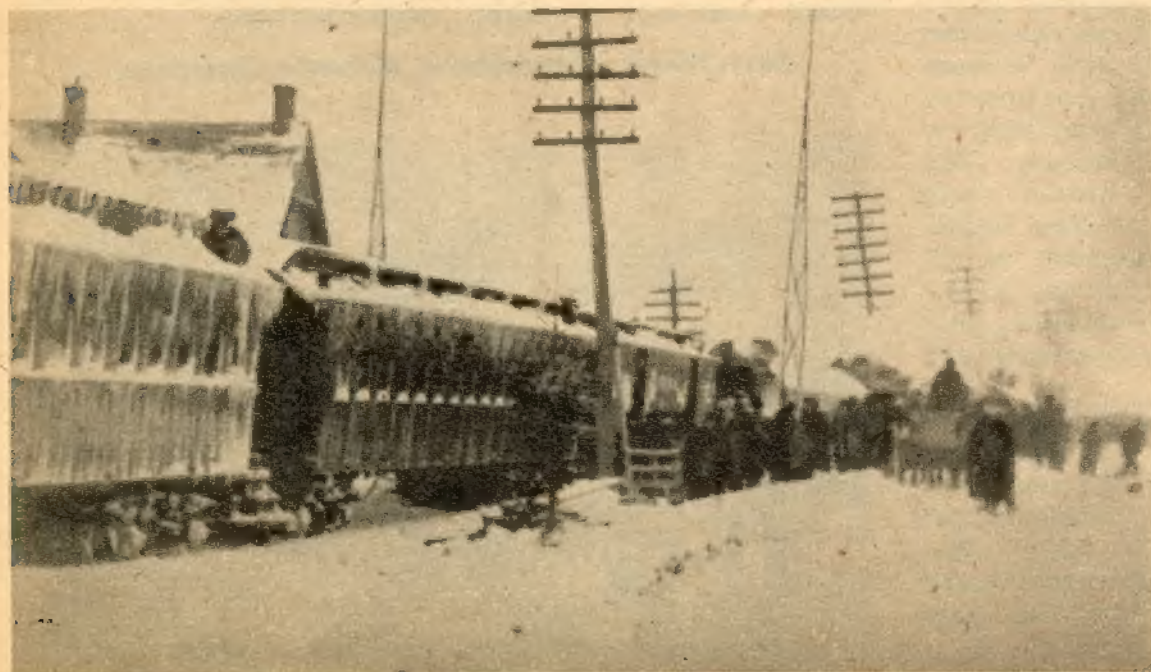
The job was two-fold. First they had to clear drifts from every cut in the state. Secondly, they had to get the more than 50 derailed locomotives back on the tracks. An estimated force of more than 15,000 laborers set to work to do the job by hand, aided in the deepest drifts by engines running in tandem.

No Lackawanna trains ran on Tuesday. Many of the eager bankers found other transportation to Newark, only to find the trains there just as snowbound.

One old gentleman from Orange drew up in front of the Market Street station aboard a child's sled hooked behind a large roan horse. He shook the snow off his clothes, brushed off his beard and laughed with the crowd. "No trains, sir," some one called.

"No matter," the Orange man replied. "I got here just the same!" He went across the street to the

(Continued on Following Page)



Photographer of 1888 snapped this scene as Orange residents came to the aid of marooned passengers aboard stalled Lackawanna train.

NEWARK SUNDAY NEWS

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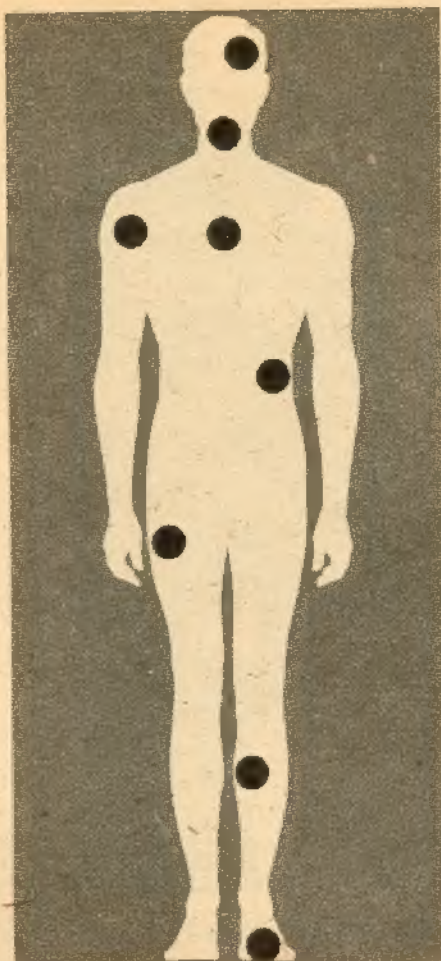
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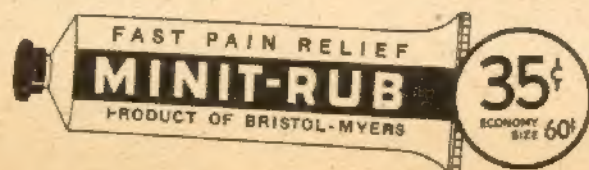
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NEWARK SUNDAY NEWS

JERSEY RAILROADS---In the Blizzard of '88



Railroad workers digging out snowbound "Summit Accommodation" in Orange.

(Cont'd from Preceding Page)
saloon to join the man from Rahway who had gone there the day before.

A LEHIGH VALLEY train got into Newark Tuesday afternoon and its brakeman boasted that his railroad's powerful engines could break through the drifts at Bergen Hill, if given the chance. Instead, the Lehigh locomotive was detached and with three others went out to help the Chicago Limited. They couldn't budge it.

Bitter cold—close to the zero mark—dropped in on the heels of the storm to complicate the troubles. Engines which had been kept steaming to keep from freezing ran out of water. Other locomotives froze up tightly. Livestock in open box cars froze to death.

Above all, the railroads found that in many places drifts had become solid ice. Jersey Central reported that hundreds of laborers chipped with iron pickaxes at such a formation in Bergen Cut.

TUESDAY at 5:20 P. M. a Pennsylvania train partially broke the blockade by running from Jersey City to Newark. It returned at 8:50, then ran every 45 minutes all night. The next day the Chicago Limited was pried loose and taken back to Jersey City for restocking—its liquor and food supply completely gone.

Irregular service was restored on most lines by Wednesday noon, although Jersey Central didn't run any trains to Plainfield until Wednesday night and Lackawanna service wasn't completely restored until Thursday. The Pennsylvania tracks were open as far as New Brunswick on Wednesday, but it took another full day to bite through a four-mile-long drift between New Brunswick and Trenton.

The Erie had fair service to Paterson by Wednesday and on Friday proudly announced that it was "completely out from under the drifts" when its Chicago Express steamed into Jersey City four days late.

Thursday the Chicago Limited went west, with the 31 storm veterans pointing

out to awed newcomers where they had been stuck for three days. The Florida train also roared cross state on Thursday—only 45 minutes (and four days) late.

THE Erie had a bad fright on Thursday when a rock mass weighing 100 tons fell from the roof of its Bergen Tunnel, tying up the line. Workmen pried another great mass loose from the roof before clearing the tracks.

The roads clear, the railroads turned to their stuck engines. Those out of water used melted snow in many instances to fill the boilers. Others called on fire departments.

Frozen locomotives were a somewhat different matter, but generally they hissed into action after kerosene-soaked waste was lighted under them to melt the ice.

On Friday railroad traffic was normal and the railroads began to add up the cost. Passengers began sifting in their minds the things they would tell generation after generation for the next 60 years. Newspapers began to hear from the outlying precincts.

MINGLED with the reminiscing there were sad stories.

The saddest came from Hackettstown, where Engineer Charles Baker was crushed to death under his locomotive, the "Montclair." Baker's engine was one of five hooked together to fight

drifts in the western part of the state where the engine fleet met with disaster near Musky Bridge.

Two engineers and a fireman were killed in a derailment at Flemington. A Pennsylvania fireman received a fractured skull when an engine left the track in Jersey City and rammed into a telegraph pole during the storm.

A week after the storm the newspapers asked why the railroads didn't own modern rotary snowplows. One paper reported a Westerner snorting:

"You folks don't know snow. You're not ready like us. Our railroads have big rotary snowplows."

THE newspaper pointed out that of course the Western railroads had snowplows—made in Paterson, then the center of the world's rotary snow plow industry.

"One rotary snow plow of the Paterson make would have saved the railroad the cost of 20," the paper said. It pointed out that the storm had cost the railroad untold hundreds of thousands of dollars. "The blizzard would have been a splendid opportunity to exhibit and advertise the merits of the plow," the editor concluded.

There wasn't a rotary machine to be had, however. Every Paterson plow had been delivered to Western railroads before Winter set in.

Eastern railroad men said they hadn't believed it could snow that hard.

Next Week: Overcoming Nature's Obstacles



A Paterson rotary snow plow on the job in 1888, but not in Jersey. Scene is town in far west.

March 11, 1951